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Catesby's World: England

Janet Browne

Mark Catesby's achievements connect him so closely to the early history of North America that it is sometimes hard to think of him as an Englishman, born and bred, and generally resident in England. His career, prospects, and financial livelihood were firmly based in England. As such, he lived through a period of great religious and political upheaval, set into motion by the abdication of catholic King James II, following which William and Mary and three other protestant sovereigns took the throne in turn, and Anglicanism became established as the state religion. During this time England and Scotland were united into Great Britain, and the War of Spanish Succession was fought in the British colonies of North America. England lost much of Florida and Canada to rival European nations. We hear little of this in Catesby's writings but it nevertheless formed the backdrop to all his endeavors at home and abroad.

It is also sometimes difficult to summarize natural history in England during this period. In Catesby's time there was a very wide spectrum of topics covered by that label, including the study and collection of antiquities and much interest in mythology, languages and anthropology, as well as the observational sciences of astronomy, meteorology, comparative anatomy, and geology. Natural history, as an area of investigation, was both local and international in scope; individual and collective; and involved many different sorts of people with different aims, different social standing, religious affiliation, and education. However, whether focused on plants, animals, the earth, or the skies, it ranked highly among scientific enterprises. This was because, in England, naturalists felt that one of their primary tasks was to find and catalogue the world's resources. Many naturalists were therefore indispensable agents of mercantile economic development. Their expertise was necessary to the success of trading corporations such as the East India Company as well as playing a key part in the effort of European nations to expand their geographic reach by acquiring overseas colonies, such as those in North America. Of course not every English naturalist was commercially engaged. The majority had been educated as physicians or theologians and it was not part of their daily business to link nature directly with commerce. Instead, their work was often conceived as serving the newly consolidated protestant creed of natural theology in which the faithful described the world in terms of God's wonders and His beneficent design. For these reasons, from as early as the sixteenth century the subject of natural history was generally regarded by Englishmen and women as one of the most valuable of the useful arts. Commercial enterprise was felt to be entirely compatible with the

widespread adoption of the Anglican form of natural theology. Reliable knowledge of plants and animals was highly prized information that could lead to improvements in horticulture, animal husbandry, mineralogy, medicine, and mining while simultaneously revealing the moral truths of nature and encouraging human virtue, all of which were considered basic resources for a nation's economic success and the happiness of its inhabitants.

This promise of material gain, both individual and national, supported by lofty philosophical ambitions, prompted people in England to invest enormous amounts of time and effort in obtaining precise information about natural things. Botany, for example, was not only an essential cog in the economic engine of the growing British empire, and a fundamental element in medical training, but also attracted wealthy landowners, gardeners, and horticulturists who yearned to acquire unusual plants, as well as members of the learned elite willing to sponsor collectors or support natural history publications. Natural history was simultaneously the big science of England and also offered an attractive range of pursuits and interests to the public.¹

Corresponding naturalists

How did Catesby manage to gain a foothold in this world? We know that at this period that it was not enough just to be talented or eager to travel.² Catesby, like so many other ambitious naturalists, needed some kind of introduction to the patronage systems of the day and offers of financial support.³ We also know that natural history in England during Catesby's lifetime was a tightly integrated social network, comprising individuals of varied backgrounds, skills, and education many of whom were connected one way or another through the medium of correspondence.⁴ Indeed, letters provided naturalists with a crucial social cement. For letters do much more than communicate news and views. They are an integral part of the organization of literate societies, one of the key means by which people establish and transmit common value systems; and letters and correspondence networks had a large part to play in consolidating the social relationships and infrastructure necessary for the rise of modern science. Ideas and business matters were shared and exchanged by letter among the European scholarly community, and crossed the Atlantic in both directions. Correspondence was an essential component of the natural history world that Catesby aimed to join.

For example, correspondence used to be one of the main ways that natural philosophers collected, processed, and disseminated data. Charles Darwin has been a popular figure for attention in the nineteenth century, but other individuals were just as expert in generating and using correspondence networks as a scientific tool, such as Philip Miller, the head gardener of the Chelsea Physic Garden during the middle years of the eighteenth century. During his tenure, Miller transformed the private

Society of Apothecaries' garden into one of the greatest botanical gardens in Europe through the building of an extensive network of correspondents around the world.⁵ Miller's correspondence with botanists and collectors of the day generated an extraordinary exchange of plants and seeds, many of them cultivated for the first time in Britain at Chelsea. Miller wrote a number of significant botanical works, including *The Gardeners Dictionary*, first published in 1731, which became the standard reference work for gardeners in Britain and America. A later work of Miller's even provided a source of botanical illustrations to be copied onto local Chelsea tableware. He corresponded with Carl Linnaeus and invited him to visit the Physic Garden in the 1730s, although he was personally reluctant to use Linnaeus's innovative nomenclature in his publications. Miller thus positioned himself at the centre of an information network that not only served him personally but also opened British botany to transformative new knowledge.

Miller was neither the first nor the only corresponding naturalist. Other botanic gardens were following suit. Those in Oxford and Edinburgh were founded in 1670, and both became important centres for the cultivation and international exchange of plants. Individuals, too, made a mark. Henry Compton, Bishop of London, had a botanical correspondent in John Bannister, who went first to the West Indies and then to Virginia, and before his untimely death, sent Bishop Compton drawings, seeds, and perhaps living specimens for the bishop's garden in Fulham, and from which his friend, John Ray, compiled the first published account of North American flora, in his *Historia Plantarum* (1688). Another such naturalist, Peter Collinson, a London-born Quaker merchant, engaged in an extended correspondence with John Bartram in Philadelphia and was responsible for importing many boxes of seeds from the colonies on a syndicated system intended to enrich the gardens of wealthy English owners.⁶ Initially Collinson focused on establishing a regular trade between English naturalists and the American colonies. Later he transmitted botanical information to the Royal Society of London, and in return relayed the Royal Society's findings back to America. Collinson also corresponded with Catesby. The collected correspondences of Collinson, John Ray, James Petiver, Sir Hans Sloane, Richard Richardson, and others indicate the extraordinary reach of circles of letters moving across Britain and the colonies. John Ray believed that Petiver had "the greatest correspondence both in East and West Indies of any man in Europe." As an early editor of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*, Sloane received and preserved some tens of thousands of letters.

By writing letters, Miller, Collinson, Sloane, and others were actively participating in a traditional form of scientific communication dating from the sixteenth century onwards. The hundreds of letters that survive in the archives of Conrad Gesner, the Swiss naturalist, for example, testify to the existence of an early republic of letters connected by the universal language of Latin. Only a little later, the French

savant, Marin Mersenne, used correspondence to put himself at the center of an extensive information network. Similarly, the English natural philosophers Henry Oldenberg, and afterwards, James Jurin, at the Royal Society of London, intentionally made themselves nodal points in the traffic of ideas, calling themselves “intelligencers” and writing to figures they designated as corresponding members of the Society. In Sweden Linnaeus’s global natural history enterprise required many letters, nearly 5,000 of which are extant. Catesby was one of Linnaeus’s many correspondents.

In fact, before the modern scientific journal had come into being, a significant proportion of correspondence was meant to be shared, copied, read aloud at informal meetings, and often do double duty as a form of publication. Letters were frequently regarded as the first step in generating a scientific fact, and communication networks were felt to be the best way to bring those potential scientific facts to the attention of others. At the same time, correspondents turned increasingly to the use of the vernacular in their letters: English and French being the most popular forms of expression. Many of these early networks took shape through the exchange of information and specimens at coffee shops, for example the Temple Coffee House in London. The names of Sir Hans Sloane and James Petiver were closely associated with this group of naturalists, although much about the so-called club, even its name and location, remains mysterious.⁷ Meetings in convivial metropolitan spots, such as pubs or coffee houses, certainly marked the beginning of botanical field networks and societies.⁸ As time went by, these activities consolidated into the much more structured system that took place in the meetings of scientific societies for reading and evaluating information supplied by strangers. Writing and handling letters, it seems, were precursors to the basic procedures of modern scientific publishing—peer review, authentication, and dissemination.

Networks are normally made up of people with unequal and irregular ties to each other, and these patterns of communication provide benefits and duties depending on where you are situated in the network.⁹ An unknown naturalist in the late seventeenth century, for example, could only join the network through an appropriate introduction, and much of the validity of what might be said in a letter depended on who was prepared to vouch for its accuracy. Overlapping circles of correspondence were therefore significant, allowing personal movement through the circles by introduction.¹⁰ If an individual had some special knowledge, this could be very helpful in gaining access to the network. So was the act of gift-giving. Botanists, in particular, were active in developing a sophisticated process of gift-giving up and down the social scale, where two packets of seeds from a garden in Philadelphia might be exchanged for duplicate herbarium sheets from Chelsea Physic Garden or smooth the process of introduction to a higher-ranking botanist.¹¹

So although little of Catesby's own correspondence has survived, we can nevertheless track by inference his movement through the network of English naturalists. These well-organized and self-contained infrastructures, held together by correspondence and exchange, need to be factored into our current understanding of Catesby's career path.

Getting into the Network

Catesby is thought to have first made himself known to naturalists in England through his uncle Nicholas Jekyll, a noted gardener at nearby Castle Hedingham. Somehow, probably through Jekyll, Catesby became acquainted with, the physician and apothecary Samuel Dale (1659-1739). Dale was an excellent naturalist, renowned for his knowledge of local geology, plants and bird life, resident in Braintree, and an acquaintance of the great botanist and natural philosopher the Reverend John Ray.¹² Through Dale's extensive network of contacts, Catesby was put in touch with two significant figures of the period. First was William Sherard (1659-1728), a well-connected botanist and patron of other botanists, who returned to England in 1717 after serving as British Consul at Smyrna, and would become a generous benefactor to Oxford University and its botanic garden. Sherard gave Ray extensive data about European plants after his travels on the continent; and his brother James (1666-1738), a London apothecary, grew a magnificent collection of plants on his estate near Eltham that was recognized as one of the finest private gardens in England. These two brothers were liberal patrons of the German systematist Johann Jacob Dillenius and instrumental in recruiting him to the Oxford Botanic Garden. Catesby acknowledged his gratitude to William Sherard in the preface to *Natural History*. The other figure influential to Catesby's life was the nurseryman and horticulturist Thomas Fairchild (1667?-1729), based in Hoxton, now a suburb of London. Fairchild was one of the leading gardeners of the time, and a fine experimental botanist, being the first recorded person to hybridise carnations to produce a new and highly marketable garden plant.¹³ He is thought to have been a member of the Society of Gardeners, and instrumental in publishing their *Catalogue of Trees and Shrubs both Exotic and Domestic which are propagated for Sale in the Gardens near London*, in 1730. Fairchild's work *The City Gardener* (1722) was a list of plants that grew well in London. In his will, he left money to fund an annual religious lecture in nearby Shoreditch.

Catesby's first visit to the English colonies (1712-1719) was carried out primarily to escort his sister Elizabeth to Williamsburg, Virginia. She was joining her husband William Cocke, who had recently begun medical practice in the area. This first journey enabled Catesby to meet several of the influential settlers of the region. He explored and collected in the countryside, made a number of watercolor illustrations of birds, and also traveled to the English colonial islands of the West Indies.

He seems to have been a congenial and cultivated man, easy to get to know, and able to identify with the intellectual changes taking place in the Atlantic world.¹⁴

On this expedition, Catesby apparently sent specimens to Dale for forwarding to others. A ticket on a herbarium sheet from Charles Dubois' collection in the Oxford Herbarium includes the remark "Rais'd from Bulbs sent from Virginia by Mr Catesby, anno 1715". And after Catesby's return from this first journey, the judicious submission of more seeds, and probably some living plants, to Dale and Fairchild opened the doors of sponsorship for a second, more systematically organised expedition to the North American colonies.¹⁵ Through Sherard, Catesby acquired the financial support of twelve notables, who were listed in the preface to his *Natural History*, including that of Sir Hans Sloane, one of the most eminent scientific figures of the day, a noted traveler and collector, at that time physician to George II, president of the Royal College of Physicians and editor of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*. Sloane would prove to be an outstanding patron to Catesby. In 1727., the year after Catesby returned from North America, Sloane became president of the Royal Society and actively promoted Catesby's intellectual and publishing concerns. Five of Catesby's supporters for his second expedition were Fellows of the Royal Society and evidently personal acquaintances of both William Sherard and Hans Sloane. It is probable that Sherard firmed up the promise of a pension for Catesby, amounting to 20 pounds per annum, that had been offered by the incoming governor of Carolina, Colonel Francis Nicholson, who met Catesby during his first expedition. In this regard, Catesby acknowledged, too, the personal assistance of William Byrd II, an affluent landowner in Virginia and a Fellow of the Royal Society. Byrd was a subscriber to the eventual volume. In a letter to Richard Richardson dated December 7, 1721, Sherard wrote: "I believe Mr. Catesby will be going to Carolina in a month. I have procured him subscriptions for near the sum he proposed."¹⁶ These sponsors no doubt expected living specimens of new world flora, or possibly paintings to be provided for their own collections. It is not clear that they also anticipated a lavishly illustrated book to be afterwards produced.

These social connections expanded dramatically after Catesby's return to England in 1726. He evidently supplied North American specimens to a number of botanists of the day, some of which are now documented at the Oxford Botanic Garden. Three hundred and forty eight specimens in Sherard's collection at Oxford bear Catesby's name; and four hundred fifty eight in Charles Dubois's collection. The Oxford herbarium also contains specimens of cultivated plants raised at Eltham Palace, the home of Sherard's brother, James (1666-1737), from seeds collected by Catesby.

Also, at some point, either before or during his travels, he decided to produce a volume of natural history illustrations. Such a book as he envisaged, required energetic application to the network of

naturalists and potential subscribers to raise funds and generate interest in the publication. In this, Catesby depended on increasingly larger circles of introduction and the opportunity to engage patrons through the Royal Society of London, to whom he showed his field drawings on his return. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society on 26 April 1733. After his return, probably through Hans Sloane, Catesby also met Georg Dionysus Ehret (1708-1770), who was to become the greatest botanical artist of the era, who enjoyed Sloane's patronage. Ehret, in turn, was a source of introductions for Catesby. Ehret drew several of the plates in the *Natural History*, including *Magnolia grandiflora*. The latter drawings were made by Ehret from a tree that produced a single blossom in Sir Charles Wager's garden at Parsons Green (not far from Fulham) in August 1737. Several versions of this image are known today. Ehret said he walked there every day from his home in Chelsea to study each stage of its unfolding and 'drew every part of it in order to publish a perfect botanical study of it'. Eventually Catesby's scientific and social connections, again probably through Sloane, put him on a path that allowed him to approach the royal family for permission to dedicate his first volume to Queen Charlotte and later on, the second volume to the Princess of Wales.¹⁷ A sign of his increasing reputation was that he was ushered into the royal presence by Lord Carteret, who was also one of the Lords Proprietors of Carolina.

The commercial aspects of Catesby's work in this period should not be separated from his professional botanical aspirations and connections. Even though there is very little information available about his financial state at this point, it is fair to assume that he probably retained enough of the property inherited from his father to be independent financially. Yet in 1726 he began to work with several London nurserymen to encourage an interest in North American trees and shrubs. Horticulturists and landowners were prominent members of English botanical circles. It seems that Thomas Fairchild, the London nurseryman, had earlier dispatched garden plants to Catesby while in America to distribute to American clients.¹⁸ However he was ready to assist in developing a market for American trees and shrubs in England which was a valuable form of support. It appears that Catesby worked with Fairchild for some years, for in a little known prospectus for Catesby's *Natural History*, he advised potential subscribers that they could visit him at Fairchild's to examine the preparatory drawings for the plates.¹⁹ Catesby then joined another horticultural specialist, Christopher Grey, in Fulham, west of London, who specialized in growing on magnolias and other plants that Catesby introduced to England from America.²⁰ Some of these plants were described and illustrated in Catesby's *Hortus Britanno-Americanus* published posthumously in 1763, and re-issued with a slightly different title in 1767. The magnolia was the first species to be discussed in the latter work, probably by this time Catesby's "signature" plant. Catesby evidently intended in this work to disseminate information about the proper collection and propagation of the choice American plants he introduced

to England. An indication of the extent of his participation in horticulture at this period can be found in his remark that he lost several hundreds of seedling magnolias in a severe frost in 1740. In the preface, it is said:

By a long acquaintance with the trees and shrubs of America, and a constant attention since for several years to their cultivation here, I have been enabled to make such observations on their constitution, growth and culture, as may render the management of them easy to those who shall be desirous to enrich their country, and give pleasure to themselves, by planting and increasing these beautiful exotics; and I shall think myself very happy, if this little work may excite any to what in my opinion is evidently a public good (21).

Christopher Gray's broadsheet *Catalogue of American Trees and Shrubs* published about 1740 used an uncoloured engraving by Mark Catesby of Ehret's *Magnolia grandiflora* watercolour as the centerpiece. This catalogue, using both English and French, made it clear that the market for American trees and shrubs extended to the rest of Europe, as well as Britain.

Indeed Catesby's illustrations in *Natural History* and other texts were, in a way, substitutes for living specimens for those people who did not have access to his real plants, in the sense that the illustrations were conveniently collected together in a series and distributed in book form almost as if they were the equivalent of a visit to a botanic garden placed between two covers. Such illustrations could serve as a tempting showpiece or visual catalogue of striking new plants that were available to gardeners through English nurserymen. Taken all together, Catesby's publications, I suggest, reveal a fascinating integration between the expansion of academic learning, the marketing of new plants, and shrewd self-promotional material.

So Catesby's movement among the learned botanists and gardeners of the nation, his activities with horticulturists and wealthy individuals who would eventually purchase living American plants, and his efforts to obtain the necessary support for his artistic endeavors, were all facilitated by the existence of a circle of botanical correspondents who welcomed him and took him up as figure well worth attention.

We tend to take such social links for granted. Yet these structures of connection were powerful enough that Catesby, as a man with ambition, a liking for natural history and an entrepreneurial frame of mind, could finance a four-year visit to England's American colonies, and on his return successfully enter the scientific world as an artist-naturalist. His success in that enterprise directly emerged from

his extraordinary talent and ingenuity. But with hindsight, we can also see that each of those steps depended on the existence of a network of men living in England and the North American colonies, who were connected by correspondence, gardening expertise, commercial interests, and the exchange and marketing of specimens.

Notes

1. H. Cook (1993, 2007); Allen (1976).
2. Smith and Findlen (2002).
3. Secord (1994b); Gascoigne (1993); Findlen (2008).
4. Harris (2008).
5. Minter (2000: 11-28); Le Rougetel (1971).
6. O'Neill and McLean (2008).
7. Johns (2008).
8. Allen (1976: 10); Secord (1994a); and Riley 2006.
9. Christakis (2009).
10. Spary (2000), See also W. Cook (2012) who discusses eighteenth-century botanical correspondence networks and describes these as a “commonwealth of learning”.
11. These examples are imaginary. For an analysis of gift-giving practices up and down the social scale, see Secord 1994b.
12. The entry for Catesby in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* confuses Catesby's uncle Nicholas Jekyll with his grandfather of the same name; and mistakes Catesby's sister Elizabeth for his aunt. For Catesby's early contacts, see Meyers and Pritchard 1998, Brigham 1998, Frick and Stearn 1961: 3-8, and French 2000: 56. A comparable trajectory has been mapped out by William Cook relating to Samuel Dale's nephew Thomas (1700-1750). See W. Cook 2012. From Catesby's letters we know he sent material from Carolina to Isaac Rand at the Chelsea Physic Garden and to the Earl of Oxford. He was in correspondence with Sir George Markham too. There is no full listing of Catesby's extant correspondence, but letters are known to have been sent in his lifetime to Linnaeus, Gronovius, Collinson, John Bartram, Sloane, William Byrd II, Sherard, and Dillenius. His letter writing was not on the grand scale of Collinson's, but see Frick and Stearn 1961: 86-98. Laird 1998 details the garden plants introduced by Catesby.
13. Leapman 2000, pp. 155-184.

14. Chaplin 1998.
15. This significant period in Catesby's career is described by Meyers and Pritchard 1998, pp. 5-7 and Frick and Steans 1961, pp.17-21.
16. Frick and Steans 1961, p 19.
17. Ehret's life is described in Calmann 1977. Brigham 1998 discusses in detail the patronage that Catesby received.
18. Leapman 2000, p. 143.
19. The prospectus is reprinted in Mark Catesby, *The Natural History*, London, Alecto Historical Editions, 1996
20. O'Malley 1998 discussed Catesby's connections with Fairchild and Grey. See also Meyers and Pritchard 1998, p.10 note 21.
21. Catesby 1767, p 2. This work was evidently taken through publication by John Ryall who signed the dedication to Henry Seymer, of Handford, Dorset. The copy in the British Library (coloured) has a manuscript note that the price for a colored issue was reduced from the given price of 2 guineas to £ 1/11 shillings/6 pence.

